

Joint House Committee Meeting
Great Lakes and Environment, Rep. Rebekah Warren, Chair
and
Environmental Quality of the Standing Committee on Appropriations,
Rep. Doug Bennett, Chair
March 17, 2009

Good afternoon. My name is Terry Miller, and I was recently elected trustee for Monitor Township in Bay County. Previously I had been a member of my township's planning commission for eight years. I apologize for the fact that I am unable to be here, I would have very much liked to have presented my statement in person.

I would like to say that I am very opposed to any change in Michigan's efforts to preserve and protect its wetlands, unless it is to increase the state staff of those committed to defending these ecological wonders.

As a youngster growing up in southern Bay County in the fifties, I had the benefit of a river, woods, and wetlands within easy walking distance. I spent many an afternoon in each of these areas, and feel privileged having had the opportunity. Fishing and swimming in the river, climbing trees in the woods, and searching for frogs, turtles, and pike, as well as the other mysteries of wetlands, all made my youth more memorable. That family home today is bereft of those opportunities. The forested area has become a mobile home park, the river has become overgrown and inaccessible, and the wetland divided between farming and a field of phragmites. Future generations will not know the joy of experiencing these areas as I knew them, and that is a real loss.

As an adult, I have learned in starts and fits the role that wetlands play in our natural world. I have learned that over half of Michigan's wetlands have been lost since Michigan was settled, and that nearly every day more of these amazing features are sacrificed to private or public development.

As you undoubtedly know, wetlands provide for flood control, helped filter pollutants out of water, stabilize shorelines, provide for wildlife and fisheries habitat, allow for groundwater recharge, and, as in my youth and later adulthood, recreational opportunities.

The question I would ask you, if I could be here in person, would be: What regulatory agency, what law, would best protect these vital natural resources?

I would hope your answer would be, given the multiple threats to Michigan's wetlands, both federal and state agencies. This two pronged approach, based on over-lapping authority and jurisdiction, and armed with state and federal law, are absolutely necessary -- neither can do the job by itself.

I have known dedicated members of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE), who spent a lifetime protecting coastal wetlands often enduring verbal abuse if not physical threats. But I don't believe the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers can adequately protect Michigan's wetlands. It is my understanding that under federal law an estimated 930,000 acres, approximately 17 percent of our wetlands, would go unprotected.

In addition, the multiple missions of the ACCE frequently forces choices that see drain or dredge projects that interfere with wetland protection. I have personally witnessed a Corps project partly in my county that resulted in the loss of four hundred acres of tiled, farmed, floodplain wetland. It was converted to a hole in the ground for contaminated

dredge spoils. This was done adjacent to a State Game Area, endangers wildfowl migration, and takes these acres out of the wetland inventory. Incidentally, this would have been unnecessary if the political will to negotiate the use of an existing industrial landfill had prevailed.

We are the Great Lakes state, and our lakes need their wetlands; our children need our wetlands. Wetlands have been described as the equivalent of the Serengeti, it is the one ecological feature in North America with the most biodiversity, and in an increasingly urbanized state, an access point to our past and our natural world. It is in wetlands that we see the loon and the bald eagle; find cranberries and the marsh marigold; seek out the wood turtle and bullfrog. They need to be preserved.

As a township planning commission member I was vigilant against any development that posed a threat to wetlands. I relied on the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) to provide accurate evaluation of wetland assets, appropriate development, and if necessary, transparency in the form of public hearings. I would ask you, as elected officials, to remain guardians of Michigan's wetlands; to support both federal and state regulatory authority and to continue to support Michigan's Wetland Protection Act, and the career employees of the MDEQ who are defending our last remaining wetlands.

I urge you to take the strongest steps possible to recommit Michigan to a vigorous defense of these vitally important areas.

Respectfully,

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